FREEMAN JUNCTION . . .

. . . The Escape Route of the Mississippians and Georgians from Death Valley in 1849

By **ARDIS M. WALKER**

With an introductory from the writings of
Robert Glass Cleland
in the Annual Publication of the
Historical Society of Southern California: 1933

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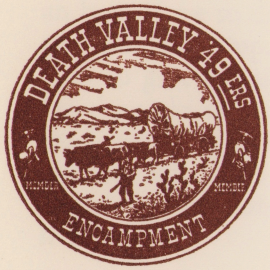

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BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION

Because he knew so well and expressed so clearly, more than 25 years ago, the historical significance of Freeman Junction, it is most appropriate that the words of the historian Robert Glass Cleland, taken from his *The Valley of Dry Bones,* be used to introduce this program.

"We are traveling now by automobile on the road to Owens Valley. Passing through Red Rock Canyon, we have reached a spot some twenty miles beyond. The road is hard, wide, and little traveled. We can easily make 50 or 60 miles an hour if we so desire. But instead we slow down, pull over to one side and stop. There is little to see here; nothing in the view to give us inspiration or arouse even momentary interest. On the right only endless miles of desert; on the left a curving road with a sign marked "Walker Pass", and a wall of forbidding hills. But let us tarry for a moment and see if our knowledge of history can make even this desolate landscape live.

"Presently on the left a distant cloud of dust appears—it draws nearer—and time rolls back a hundred years. We are watching now a caravan composed of men on horseback, pack animals, and slow moving cattle. The members of the company are strangely clad, and curiously unlike the men we know in daily life. They wore buckskin instead of cloth, and moccasins instead of shoes. Their faces are heavily bearded and tanned by sun, wind, and frost to the color of old mahogany. Their eyes are never still, for every bush, hollow, and rock may be the lurking place of enemies. Across the pommel of his saddle each man carries a long, muzzle-loading rifle; and in the belt around his waist a scalping knife and tomahawk. Over his left shoulder and under his right arm hang powder horn and bullet pouch.

"An amazing tale these men could tell of the crossing of deserts, and Indian ambuscades—of the grim passage of the

frowning Sierra when the winter snows threatened daily to blot them out — of the hidden valley in these mountains with precipitous sides down which great rivers plunged to lose themselves in spray a mile below—a valley we now call Yosemite, which no eye of white man but theirs had ever looked upon. They could tell of piercing cold, of weariness which brought them to the verge of death; of vain efforts to ease the belly-pinch of hunger with the lean, black flesh of worn-out horses; of lazy, idle days and boisterous nights at Monterey.

"So, as we wait by the side of this desert road, the uncouth company of Joseph Walker, trapper, guide, explorer of an empire, comes within our vision, rounds the point of the mountain, and passes out of sight.

"The illusion on our left is over; but as we turn our eyes to the right, without leaving the place where we sit, we see strange figures moving across the desert sands. Here is no compact company of hardy, well-mounted trappers, but a straggling handful of gaunt, half-famished spectres. In the pathetic procession are women as well as men, and even little children. In the rear, unnoticed by his companions, a man staggers and halts, and falls face downward on the sand. Swinging cowhide bags on either side of a lean, gaunt ox, two small boys are begging pathetically for water. A woman, patient, uncomplaining, supremely heroic, walks beside them. She has no water with which to satisfy their thirst; but somehow out of the inexhaustible resources of her mother's heart, she finds comfort and courage to quiet the suffering of her tired sons.

"So the Manly party and the Briers pass within sight of the spot where we sit, and struggle on toward the succor and hospitality of the owner of the Del Valle Rancho—"

FREEMAN JUNCTION

By ARDIS M. WALKER

In the beginning a pattern was set by Indians who moved through deserts and mountains. Their pattern was moccasin-

padded trails which converged at Freeman Junction from all the limitless wilderness regions north, south, east and west. Here the bearers of native cultures and commodities passed a common junction;—coastal Indians headed toward the land of the Pueblos with shells from the shores of the Pacific;—Hopi dancers headed west to trade their talents for beads with the Yokuts of the San Joaquin.

Here, too, a pattern for conquest was set in 1834. Joseph Reddeford Walker headed a cavalcade of trappers in buckskin, horses, cattle and dogs north along an ancient Indian trail that penetrated Owens Valley and the limitless salt desert beyond. He bore tidings of the discovery of Walker Pass to his rendezvous with United States Army Captain B. L. E. Bonneville. Thus an emergent nation east of the Rocky Mountains received word of the northernmost snow-free pass across the Sierra Nevada; a year-round gateway for the migrant and the military.

The migrants came in 1843; members of the Joseph B. Chiles party led down the old Indian trail from Owens Valley to Freeman Junction, then west over the pass by Captain Walker. They were home makers, heralds of a new culture and bearers of the freight of a new empire.

Then came the military. On November 24, 1845 Walker led a company south from the sinks of the Humboldt. From Freeman Junction he turned west across his pass with the main body of the Third Fremont Expedition. Its billing as a scientific corps veiled very thinly its real purpose of military reconnaissance. Rumors of war were in the air; when the Mexican War broke, the members of this expedition were present to help fix permanently the seal of Manifest Destiny,—to wrest California and the West from the administration of a decadent Mexico.

After the conquest new patterns were to be set at the junction of the trails. No longer the leisurely moving brigade of bewhiskered, buckskinned trappers nor any hesitant corps on

reconnaissance;—now the world was shaken by the impact of the gold rush. Echoes of this excitement eddied about the junction of the trails and all across the land.

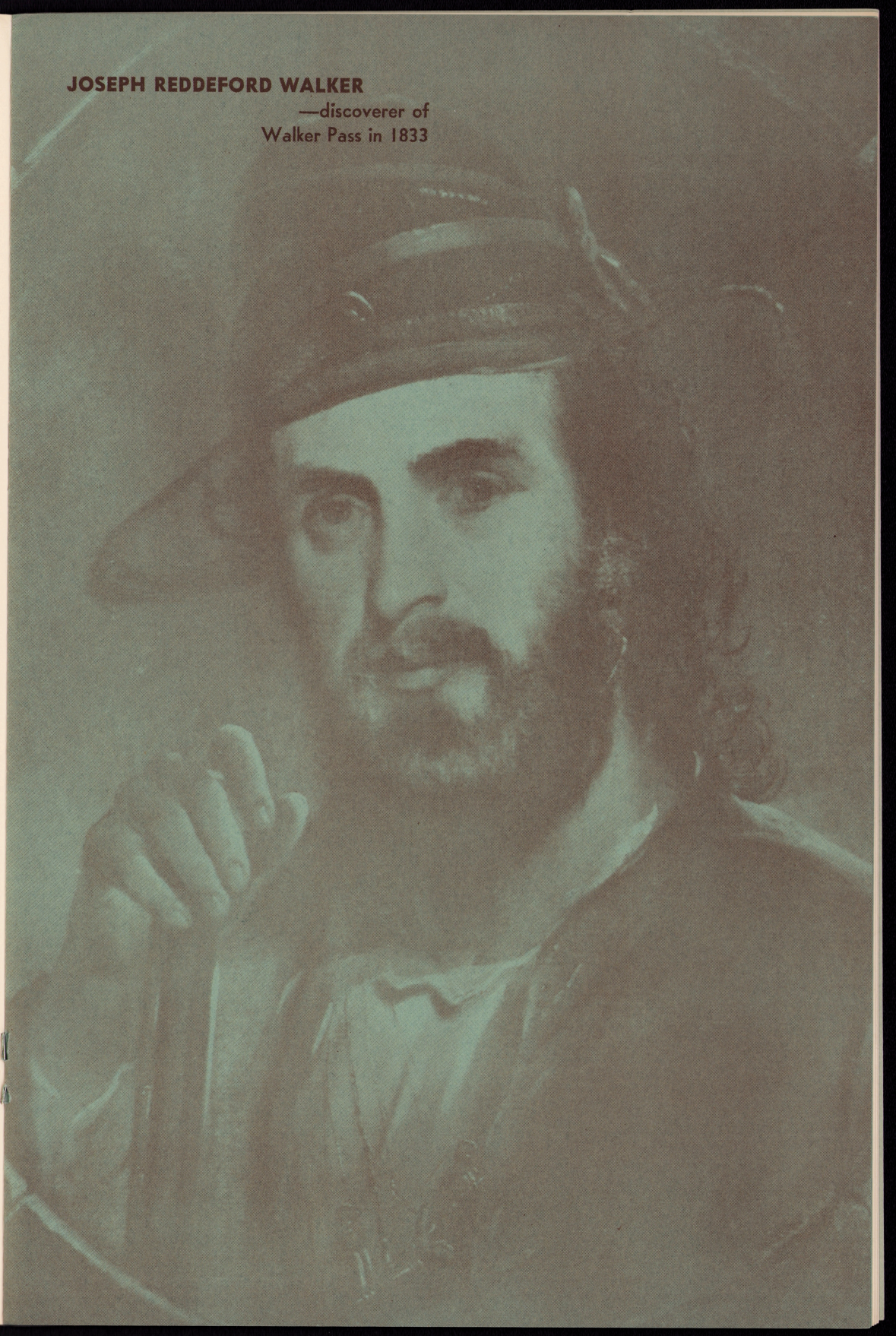
Gold hunters who started west by land too late to miss the winter snows of the Sierra Nevada were counciled to take their wagon trains south along the Old Spanish Trail to Southern California, thence north by way of the interior valleys to the Mother Lode. In October of 1849 the Sandwalking Company, a massive wagon train of gold seekers, moved south from Salt Lake under guidance of Captain Jefferson Hunt. He had contracted to guide them to California by this route.

But rumors of the pass discovered by Walker in 1834 were afloat. In fact Captain O. K. Smith of the company produced a map purporting to show a route directly west to the forks of the old trails. It was simple, he said. The Reverend J. W. Brier added his eloquence to that of Captain Smith. Here was a saving of many laborious days and hundreds of tortuous miles. Besides, the people of this wagon train were rushing for gold with hearts and minds subtly attuned to greed.

So they left Captain Hunt on the Spanish Trail and turned due west in spite of his warning that the route they took would surely "lead them all to hell." And so it did. At the first bitter taste of the hell of unknown trackless miles of waterless desert mountains and mesas, most of the west-bound travelers halted, then hurried back to overtake the wagons of Jefferson Hunt.

But more than a hundred desperate souls, more determined in adversity or more stubborn in disillusionment, doggedly struggled on toward the west with their oxen and wagons and worldly goods. They were to set another pattern around the forks of the trails, a pattern of tragedy, of heroism, of despair and of an innate and unquenchable urge to survive.

Counted among these were the Jayhawkers, the Brier Party and the party rescued by Manly and Rogers and those other Argonauts who fled the horrors of the Death Valley episode



JOSEPH REDDEFORD WALKER
—discoverer of
Walker Pass in 1833

Program

DEDICATION
of
FREEMAN JUNCTION MONUMENT

(REGISTERED STATE HISTORICAL SITE 766)

11:00 A. M.
THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 9, 1961

WELCOME . . . . . GEORGE H. STURTEVANT
President, Death Valley '49ers

PRESENTATION OF CHAIRMAN . . . . RICHARD HOSKING
President, Kern County Historical Society

GREETINGS . . . . . FLOYD MING
Chairman, Kern County Board of Supervisors

GREETINGS . . . . . MAURIE L. SORRELLS
Chairman, Inyo County Board of Supervisors

GREETINGS . . . . . PAUL J. YOUNG
Chairman, San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors

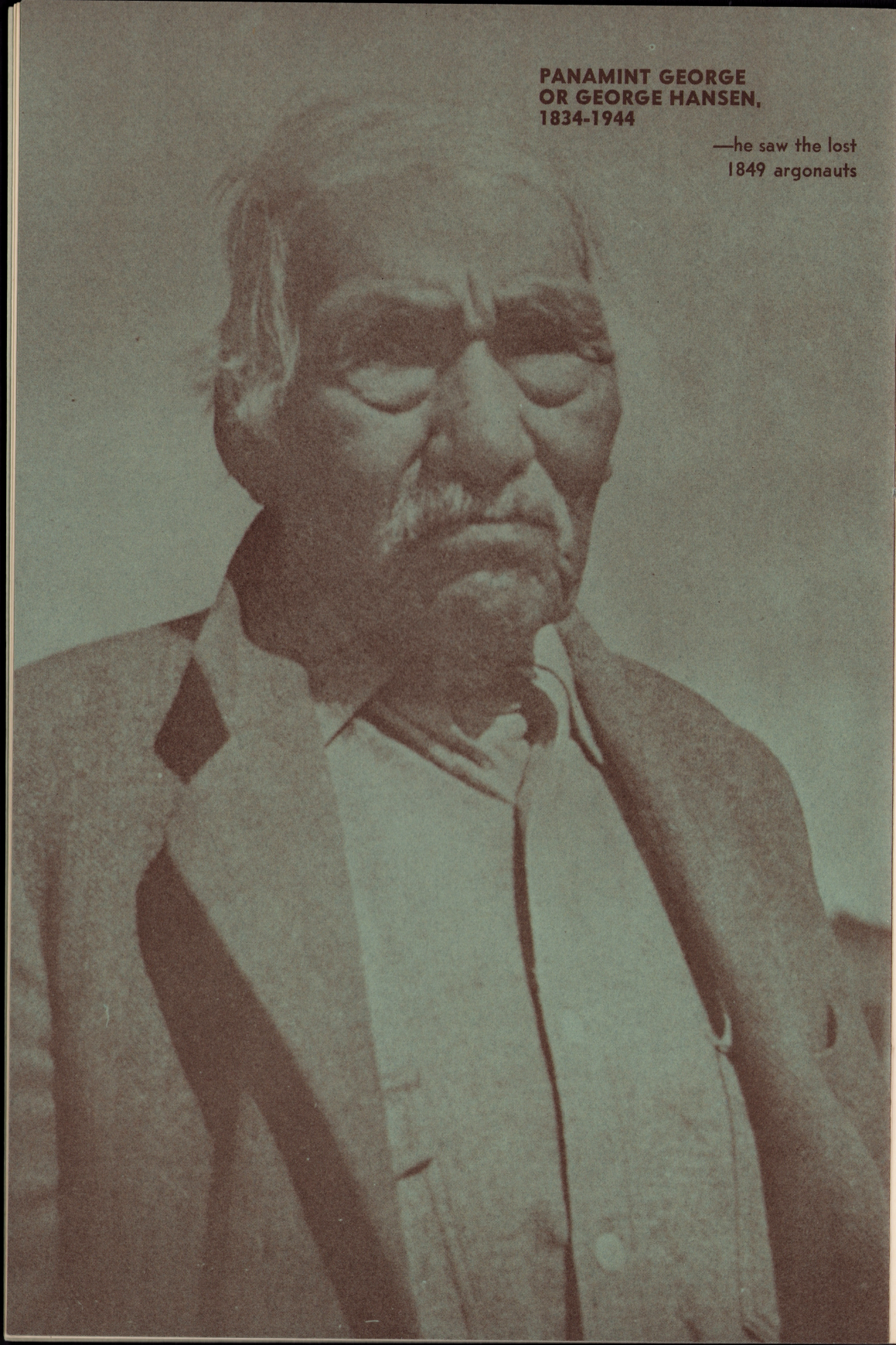
GREETINGS . . . . . R. W. LOUDON
Chairman, Kern County Museum Advisory Committee

FREEMAN JUNCTION
IN 1834 EXPLORER JOSEPH R. WALKER PASSED THIS JUNCTION OF INDIAN TRAILS AFTER DISCOVERING NEARBY WALKER PASS. DEATH VALLEY '49ER PARTIES HERE DIVERGED WEST AND SOUTH AFTER THEIR ESCAPE FROM DEATH VALLEY ENROUTE TO THE CALIFORNIA GOLD FIELDS. LATER THIS BECAME A JUNCTION POINT WHERE THE BANDIT TIBURCIO VASQUEZ PREYED ON STAGES AND FREIGHTERS TRAVELING BETWEEN THE KERN RIVER MINES AND LOS ANGELES AND THE MINES OF BODIE AND THE PANAMINTS.
CALIFORNIA REGISTERED
HISTORICAL LANDMARK NO. 766
PLAQUE PLACED BY THE CALIFORNIA STATE PARK COMMISSION IN COOPERATION WITH THE DEATH VALLEY '49ERS, INC. AND THE KERN COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY, NOVEMBER 9, 1961.

GREETINGS . . . . . MRS. W. R. HARRIMAN
Member, California Park Commission

ADDRESS . . . . . ARDIS MANLY WALKER
Past President, Death Valley '49ers

MONUMENT UNVEILING . . . . . RICHARD C. BAILEY
Co-Chairman, Dedication Project



PANAMINT GEORGE OR GEORGE HANSEN, 1834-1944

—he saw the lost 1849 argonauts

by going south across the Mojave Desert. Their dramatic story has been covered adequately by Manly and other historians of their group.

This is not true of those who turned west over Walker Pass. For this reason we shall take up their tragic saga in more detail. These parties consisted of the Georgians or Bug Smashers, the Mississippi Boys and the very unfortunate "party of nine or eleven." These were the most stubborn and most determined to struggle west without deviation. From fragmentary reminiscences and chance conversations at the mines much of their absorbing story has been gathered.

All the way from Mount Misery to Freeman Junction their devious and tortuous courses occasionally converged with each other and with the other Death Valley parties. At the junction, however, their remnants persevered toward the west over Walker Pass even though Manly's group and the Jayhawkers, at last succumbing to the constant bludgeoning they had endured on a westerly course from Mount Misery, turned south across the desert.

Let us go back along trails littered by worldly goods cast aside in a desperate struggle to survive. Here we can pick up the tangled threads of the melancholy story of the Bug Smashers and the Mississippi Boys. We find that they traveled in company with the Jayhawkers and others until the dread fear of death from exhaustion, starvation and thirst sent groups and individuals toiling their separate ways in the struggle for survival.

Manly expressed the situation best when he said, "It seemed as though there were many men from the parties scattered all around the country, each one seeking out the path which seemed to suit best his tender feet or present fancy, steering west as well as mountains and canyons would permit, some farther north, some farther south, and generally demoralized, each thinking that as a last resort he would be able to save his own life."

As a first drastic step to meet the rigors of their circumstances, the Georgians and the Mississippians left their wagons east of Death Valley and took off their separate ways, packing what they could on the backs of their starving oxen. In this manner they came upon the Jayhawkers camped at Salt Creek in Death Valley. At this point the Jayhawkers, too, had decided to leave their wagons which they were burning in order to smoke the black, stringy flesh of their starved oxen so as to preserve every morsel of food which might serve to maintain their own ebbing lives.

Early next morning the Bug Smashers, or Georgians, struck off on foot directly west over Tuki Mountain after giving their famished oxen to the Brier family which had accompanied the Mississippi Boys thus far. Sheldon Young, a Jayhawker, kept a tersely worded log. It serves as brief authority on the departure of the Bug Smashers. On December 28, 1849, he wrote, "This day the Bug Smashers came up with us, packing their oxen." On December 29 his entry stated, "This day the Bug Smashers left."

Yes, this day fifteen men, with little but ox jerkey strapped to their backs, trudged west across the rocky, abrasive, unyielding alluvial fan that spread out across the valley floor from Tuki Mountain. It tires the imagination to conceive a well-fed, rested hiker walking across the seemingly endless reaches of sharp, flinty rocks that form the alluviam. It is unthinkable to surmount the rigid cliffs and crevices stacked against the desert sky to form a mountain. But these men were impelled by the strength of desperation. They conquered the mountain, then won their way across rolling mesas of sage and cacti to conquer other canyons and other steeps until they moved out onto the plain bordering Owens Lake. Here they struck the Big Trail on which Walker had turned north from Freeman Junction in 1834 and followed it south to the junction. At this point their tracks pointed west over Walker Pass as the following Jayhawkers discovered before pointing their own tracks south across the Mojave.

L. Dow Stephens, when an old man, wrote his sketchy reminiscences, *Life Sketches of a Jayhawker of '49*. Therein he terminates for us the tragedy of the Bug Smashers. He says, ". . . a company of Georgians, about fifteen of them . . . Captain Townshend who seemed to be the head man of the Georgian Company, took the company through on another route. They packed their provisions on their backs and were better supplied than we were, as they still had some flour of which they gave a portion to the Brier family. They succeeded in getting through Walker Pass, on to the head of the Kern River, then into the San Joaquin Valley and to Chowchilla River where they were nearly all murdered by the Indians. I believe there were but two who escaped." Thus death seems to be the shabby reward of at least thirteen of the Bug Smashers after all of their prodigious toil.

After the departure of the Bug Smashers from the camp at Salt Creek, the Mississippi Boys, twenty in number, accompanied the Jayhawkers north then west over Townes Pass. Here fifteen of them continued west when the Jayhawkers turned south down Panamint Valley. They moved across the north end of this valley, thence into the Argus Range in the vicinity of Darwin. They followed natural contours northward to Owens Lake where friendly Indians guided them south down the Big Trail to Freeman Junction. Here they turned west in the footsteps of the Bug Smashers. They trudged to a better fate, however. Contemporaries reported them all safe at the mines when their long journey had been completed.

The last five of the Mississippians continued down the valley with the Jayhawkers until they reached a spring in the vicinity of Ballarat. Here the urge west proved too strong for them again. Departing the Jayhawkers and the Briers, they crossed the valley to the Argus Range and soon struck the path of the fifteen Mississippians who had preceded them. We have no reason to believe that they did not reach the mines in safety.

Going back again over the tangled trails that emanated

from Mount Misery, we pick up the tale of the Party of Eleven. They epitomize a pattern of stark tragedy without parallel in western annals. Back in the days when all parties were members of the great Sandwalking Company, they swerved west with the majority under the influence of Captain Smith and the Reverend Mr. Brier. They were among the footloose and fancy-free who had discarded the use of wagons and made pack-saddles for mules and horses. Historians have since designated them and their companions as the Horse and Mule Party.

Traveling light when the wagons were halted by the inaccessible canyons of Mount Misery, they were able to follow Captain Smith through the desert labyrinths leading west. Having escaped the gorge of Mount Misery, Captain Smith and his entourage arrived "at the foot of a big mountain which was covered with snow." Here, after twenty-one days of fruitless wandering, the Horse and Mule Party found Captain Smith packing his stock. Captain Smith, when urging them to turn from the Spanish Trail and take his alleged cut-off, had declared, "If you do not hear from me, you may know that I died with my face westward, and not before I had eaten some mule meat!"

Now Captain Smith was eating his words. He was preparing a hasty retreat along his fabled cut-off.

But eleven members of the Horse and Mule Party were made of much sterner stuff. Jacob Stover, who was there, reported the take-off of the Party of Eleven. He said they each "cut about ten pounds of the old grey mare," packed these scant rations on their backs and started on foot toward the west. Their subsequent wanderings are as distorted and uncertain as forms in a desert mirage until at last, exhausted and starving, they sat like living skeletons around a desert camp fire. Two of their number listened numbly as the others discussed the problem of casting lots to determine who might be sacrificed that the others might eat and survive. These two, Pinney and

Savage, held whispered conference and decided that they wanted neither to be eaten nor to eat under such circumstances. They slipped out of camp and into the protective cover of desert night.

After their escape they wandered into an Indian camp at Owens Lake where they were taken captive. Pinney was a giant of a man with flaming red hair. During his short captivity he delighted the Indians by dancing for them. Hailing him as Big Chief, they finally conducted him and his companion safely over Walker Pass. From here the two fugitives from cannibalism journeyed to the mines.

The appalling experience through which they had passed left scars of memory which would not heal. William Lewis Manly, the Homer of the Death Valley Odyssey, recalls that Pinney and Savage were contacted later in the gold fields. He points out that they became mute as under a spell and burst into tears whenever mention was made of their party, and that, therefore, they were helpless to comment when this subject preyed on their emotions.

Ten years later, somewhere out in the Slate Range, a party of prospectors reported coming upon a group of nine skeletons all huddled together behind a little barricade of brush. Constructing this pitiful wind break, they had cast their final lot to die together of starvation, privation or thirst.

Thus the pattern of stark tragedy was woven by those who trudged to death or destiny along the many converging trails gathered at Freeman Junction. Also, a pattern of elemental suffering, earthy courage and a stubborn will to survive was laid down as foundation for things to come.

Come they did, in the slow-moving parade of history! Back across Walker Pass and out over the desert trails of the Forty-niners swarmed the disillusioned of the 1850's. They sought the Lost Gunsight Mine and other lost mines and mirages from boom to bust in all the camps of the desert.

West from the Colorado came the Boundary Survey Party one hundred years ago. They prodded jaded horses and mules and three unwearied camels over the pass and on to Visalia.

In the year of 1863 Captain Moses McLaughlin rode north from Freeman Junction to drive the Indians of Owens Lake into the desert to starve or surrender. He led companies D and E of the Second California Cavalry away from his massacre of defenseless Indians at Whiskey Flat. Later that year he returned, herding the Owens Valley Indians like cattle over Walker Pass to the Tejon Reservation.

Marking the development of mines on Kern River and in the Bodie and Panamint areas were clanging chains and squeaking leather and the grind of wagon tires on gravel. Stages and freighters moved past this junction of the old Indian trails bearing the commerce of a budding new civilization between the Kern River mining camps and Los Angeles and the roaring camps of Bodie and the Panamints.

From his rocky look-out on nearby Robber's Roost, Tiburcio Vasquez, the bandit, preyed on stage and freighter alike. He added his authentic bit to the pattern of the new order.

But history is an interesting succession of ever-changing patterns. Now the old traces from north and south and east and west have merged into graded surfaces. A new migration is on. Fun-seekers and fishermen from mushrooming metropolitan Southern California, streak over these ribbons of asphalt in shining cars pulling streamlined trailers and boats to new bonanzas of recreation; to new patterns of progress.

And here at Freeman Junction some of them pause this day to recall and commemorate historic patterns of the past.